Against the Grain

Manuscript 8479

Little Red Herrings- Missing Piece of the Puzzle?

Mark Herring

Little Red Herrings — Missing Piece of the Puzzle?

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Ever since **Sven Birkerts**' *The Gutenberg Elegies*, more than one writer has sought to unravel the mystery of the decline in reading skills. Clearly, online access has not helped. It has made us less attentive, more snatch-and-grab in our pursuit of answers, less willing to read closely, and more. But we cannot place all the blame on the decline in reading solely on the advent of the Web. **NAEP** reading scores have been falling or flat for decades, and that decline began before online reading was a "thing" or a "meme." Granted, none of these things have helped. We also cannot discount the glaring fact that there were more than a million births to women 24 and younger, and of that group, seventy-one percent were to unmarried women. Almost 50% of them already had a child.

That reading skills have declined cannot be denied. From anecdotal evidence to **NAEP** scores, we find students everywhere unable to sit still long enough to read much of anything longer than a paragraph. My most dismaying experience with this occurred about a decade ago with an honors class of students. In a class of 25, only two of them read the class assignments. While everyone wanted to participate, the majority did not want to do the work to gain a ticket to participation.

All of these things — the Web, the scores of children from homes that do not value reading, and the process of reading itself — militate against effective reading, writing and math scores, of course, but perhaps there is yet one other piece to the puzzle of poor reading skills: enter Jigsaw Reading.

Jigsaw Reading, or rather the Jigsaw Method or technique, is a classroom activity that makes students dependent on others to succeed. Already you can see where this is going. We are so wedded to our modern biases that we cannot fathom that group learning can possibly be inferior to independent learning. Surely coming together as a group and dividing up the labor is far superior to that elitist method of each person doing his or her own work. That may or may not be the case, but the growing popularity of this approach is beginning to have weak dividends.

The Jigsaw Method comes to us from the mind of **Elliot Arsonson**, developed by him and his **University of Texas** students in or around 1971. **Aronson** is a masterful researcher. He graduated from **Brandeis** (BA), **Wesleyan** (MA) and **Stanford** (PhD, Psychology). He has won all three of the **APA's** highest awards in writing, teaching and research. I mention all this because I do not think the method itself may be inherently flawed but the execution of so many using a method they do not fully understand may be contributing to results. Those results range from fine to lackluster. In any event, my complaint is more about the unintended consequences, not the method itself.

With respect to reading, the Jigsaw Method often manifests itself in the form of groups of students who parcel out the work. So, for a 15-page reading assignment, each student in a group of five may have three pages to read. On the face of it, this appears to make sense. After all, isn't this similar to what soon-to-be hotshot attorneys do when trying to master a course like Contracts that often requires hundreds of pages of reading between classes?

Ah, there's the rub. In a class of budding attorneys, one is likely to find most if not all of them at or above the 95th percentile. The idea of cooperative learning here is not necessarily an inherently bad one. Granted, group-learning when I was going through school failed miserably on every attempt. Too many in the group did not do their portion of it, and all too often the lion's share of the work fell to one or two of the more motivated students. This version of it strikes me as more politically motivated than strategic, but that may just be me. I always bristle when approaches rely too much on Kumbaya and not enough on substance. The Jigsaw Method focuses on mixing together students of varying abilities, making certain, it would seem, that some are going to be less motivated to do the work. As teachers in my state have pointed out, Jigsaw Reading means that no one student reads the entire work. Each student is responsible for his or her assignment and reports back to the group. But grouping students of varying abilities means that some of those reports will be weak, and some may be worse than weak, even addlepated.

Jigsaw Reading appears on the face of it to encourage not careful reading, but short snatches of reading, while also encouraging "just enough" to get by. In our modern age, it is apparently too facile to point out that what makes reading stronger is, well, reading more and more, and more and more difficult texts. Reading is like a muscle that develops with practice. The more you do the better you become at it. Reading short parts of an article would, it appears, only encourage you to avoid longer and more complicated texts.

This is certainly what I have encountered and what teachers in the area tell me as well.

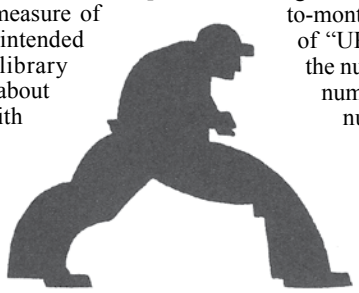
continued on page 18

Outreach Assessment ...
from page 17

paper, creating a study guide, or developing a presentation. At the end of the event, we email each of the students a Qualtrics survey which asks, among other things, what did you accomplish this evening? Compared to those initial responses, we are able to measure whether the event was high or low impact for the students who attended. The survey also asks students to rate their satisfaction with different aspects of the event, like food, space, research support, etc. in order to determine if the event did indeed provide a "stress-free, fun environment."

Our 2018 Library Open House had more specific goals. This food and swag extravaganza targeted first-year students and had two expected outcomes: (1) reduce library anxiety and (2) provide students with detailed information about library services, spaces, and collections. Every attendee was asked to provide an email address in order to enter the open house space. We then emailed those attendees and asked them to rate, "To what extent do you feel comfortable asking for help at the library?" Additionally, we asked students, "What was the most helpful thing you learned?" The results of those two questions indicated if we met our expected outcomes (79% said they felt "very comfortable" asking for help!) and can be used from year to year to measure the relative success of each subsequent open house.

Other custom assessment measures that we've developed for library programs include: creating an online dashboard to track edits and citations for Wikipedia editing events; interrogating changes in attitudes/perceptions about cultural stigmas among attendees at our annual Human Library; using juries and peer review to qualitatively assess student art work connected to our Common Book program; doing content analysis of student write-ups of events as a qualitative measure of whether the event met its intended purpose; and surveying library partners and guest speakers about their experience working with the library programming team. The unifying factor in all of these custom assessment measures is that they are developed to identify specific expected learning outcomes that are set in advance of each library program.



Assessing Communications Outreach

Compared to programming, I find assessing communications outreach to be much easier: that is, the techniques and workflows are simpler. Part of this is due to how I define success in my communications strategies: not by use of services or by attendance at events, but by eyeballs alone (i.e., how many people saw our messaging) and whether that number is growing steadily over time. In this sense, I take a decidedly limited approach to how I assess our communications efforts.

To make it more complicated, some of the outreach we do only manifests on/in our communications channels (e.g., social media) and there is no programming, service, or collections-based correlate. For example, one of our most successful Twitter projects was encouraging other units on campus to post about the ways their student workers enabled them to meet their institutional goals. This short-lived pile-on thread did not generate additional followers or drive people to our website, but it did have a record-breaking (for us) number of impressions: more than six times our average organic impressions at the time. A lot of people on campus saw that post. What they did with it or how it changed their perception or use of the library, we will probably never know, short of conducting longitudinal studies of library perceptions. Like many of our social media projects, it came about suddenly, organically, and unexpectedly: something which is difficult to replicate in a formal study.

There are, however, some things we can know. For example, we use Hootsuite to track our success on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Like many social media managers, Hootsuite allows us to create short URLs (*ow.ly*) whose usage can be tracked over time. Examining our social media content month-to-month, we can create an indicator of "URL engagement" by tracking the number of URLs posted vs. the number of click-throughs vs. the number of impressions. The same method can be applied to customized URLs that we post the digital screens in our lobby that highlight electronic resources (e.g., *bit.ly/name_of_resources*) and links in our e-newsletters. If there is a URL for it, we can track it. Though, it is worth noting that we only track URL hits and not personally identifiable information or other types of personalized metadata.

For URLs that go directly to our library website domain from social media, digital displays, or newsletters, we use SiteImprove. Among other useful tools, SiteImprove allows us to see where traffic to our website originated and what it does once it is there (stay on the site, bounce off, etc). Traffic from social media or other sources can be compared to overall site traffic to create yet another indicator (social media traffic vs. overall traffic) to measure social media engagement month to month. Showing how much traffic drives users to our website allows me to make a case for the continued investment in social media resources.

Interestingly, we also use RSVPs to track the success of our communication and outreach efforts. Yes, the number of RSVPs is probably a more accurate indicator of the general interest in a program, but we have had extremely popular events with a small number of RSVPs. And since many of our events tend to be similar in nature (e.g., a lecture by a historian; a workshop for Wikipedia), we can also use RSVPs as an indicator of how well we are "getting the word out there." Low RSVPs for an event that usually brings in a packed audience is a quick-and-dirty measure for the relative success of our communication strategy. Looking at the past two years of RSVP data, we can reasonably expect the number of actual attendees to range between 30% below or 20% above the number of RSVPs. Anything outside that range can usually be ascribed to a communications anomaly (e.g., we forgot to post it to the university calendar, or the event got picked up by the local press).

Final Thoughts

The mother lode of outreach assessment will be found when someone develops a way to combine multiple data points into a single indicator of success, similar to the Happiness Index or a Klout score. Perhaps the culture of learning analytics that seems to be growing on college campuses will provide solutions, though as many have noted, this raises certain ethical quandaries for librarians. Until then, we are left to assess each outreach project according to its own merits, nature, and expected outcomes. Onward and upward!

Little Red Herrings
from page 10

Obviously, teaching reading in the early grades is also to blame. Some elementary teachers apply too many experimental reading techniques rather than known successful methods, thereby doing more harm than good. But as students get older, teaching them to read less and less does not strike me as something that will improve the skill. If you exercise your left arm with increasing lighter weights and fewer repetitions, it is likely that muscle will not improve. My honors students often found that 25 pages assigned on Monday for Wednesday was simply far too much to ask. I may as well have asked for 250.

But why should we in librarianship care? Libraries are just about reading, right? Yes and no. Libraries are about a lot of things these days, but they are foremost about reading. If we lose more and more of our clientele to poor reading skills, we are surely to find a rising generation that simply doesn't "get" what all the books are about.

Jigsaw Reading isn't the *cherchez la femme* of poor reading skills, but it does strike me as one more nail in the coffin of libraries. Reading used to be fundamental. If it ceases to be so, we may find libraries as anything but extraneous.